DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 351 808 EA 024 518

AUTHOR Gamoran, Adam
TITLE Alternative Uses of Ability Grouping: Can We Bring High-Quality Instruction to Low-Ability Classes? Final Deliverable.
INSTITUTION Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools, Madison, WI.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE 20 Nov 92
CONTRACT R117-Q00005
NOTE 24p.; A revised version of a paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Chicago, IL, April 3-7, 1991).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Ability Grouping; Catholic Schools; Classroom Environment; English Instruction; *Instructional Effectiveness; *Low Achievement; Secondary Education; *Student Placement; Teacher Expectations of Students; Teacher Student Relationship; *Track System (Education)

ABSTRACT

Findings of a study that investigated whether or not ability grouping can be implemented more effectively are presented in this paper, with a focus on exploring possible instances of high quality instruction in low ability classes. Methodology involved observation, teacher questionnaires and interviews, student tests and questionnaires, and document analysis in 108 eighth- and ninth-grade English classes in 25 midwestern schools. The two schools that exhibited effective instruction in low-track classes were Catholic schools, which in general are characterized by an ethos of caring, academic rigor, and seriousness of purpose. Findings indicate that variability exists in the implementation of student grouping and that such differences are tied to student outcomes. Examples of effective uses of ability grouping for students in low-ranked classes in the two Catholic schools are presented. The two cases are characterized by: (1) high expectations by teachers; (2) extra exertion by teachers to foster extensive oral classroom discourse; and (3) no system for assigning weak or inexperienced teachers to lower tracks. A limitation of the study is that Catholic students tend to come from more economically advantaged backgrounds. One table is included. (Contains 25 references.) (LMI)

**********
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
**********

ED351808

# ALTERNATIVE USES OF ABILITY GROUPING: CAN WE BRING HIGH-QUALITY INSTRUCTION TO LOW-ABILITY CLASSES?

Adam Gamoran
University of Wisconsin, Madison

**FINAL DELIVERABLE**
**November 20, 1992**

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
✓ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

This paper draws on a larger project carried out collaboratively with Martin Nystrand. Research assistance for this paper was provided by Mark Berends and Paul LePore. The author is grateful for critical comments from Reba Page and from teachers who participated in the study. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 1991 meetings of the American Educational Research Association. The study was conducted at the Center on on Organization and Restructuring of Schools, Wisconsin Center for Education Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, which is supported by a grant from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (Grant No. OERI-R117-Q00005). Additional support came from the Institute for Research on Poverty at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and from the Graduate School of the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Any opinions, findings, or conclusions expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of these agencies or the U.S. Department of Education.

E4024518



BEST COPY AVAILABLE

# ALTERNATIVE USES OF ABILITY GROUPING: CAN WE BRING HIGH-QUALITY INSTRUCTION TO LOW-ABILITY CLASSES?

## ABSTRACT

Despite extensive criticism, ability grouping remains a widespread practice in American secondary schools. This paper considers whether ability grouping can be implemented more effectively than is typical; in particular, it explores possible instances of high-quality instruction in low-ability classes. Data from a study of 108 eighth- and ninth-grade English classes yield two examples of schools with apparently effective instruction in low tracks. These cases are characterized by (1) high expectations by teachers, manifested by a refusal to relinquish the academic curriculum as commonly occurs in low-track classes; (2) extra exertion by teachers to foster extensive oral discourse in class; and (3) no system of assigning weak or inexperienced teachers to lower tracks.

## ALTERNATIVE USES OF ABILITY GROUPING: CAN WE BRING HIGH-QUALITY INSTRUCTION TO LOW-ABILITY CLASSES?

[T]racking will remain an important part of American education....*Neither tracking nor heterogeneous grouping is necessarily good or bad.* The effectiveness of grouping depends on the specific situation and the needs within a school.

(Exerpts from the conclusions of a report on Academic Tracking by the National Education Association, 1990, p.27-28. Emphasis in original.)

What shall we do about ability grouping in secondary schools? Surely there is no other educational practice that has been challenged from as many quarters. Recent years have seen critiques founded on legal, historical, philosophical, sociological, anthropological, economic, and psychological bases. Grouping and tracking have always been debated, but the controversy appears especially heated at the present time.

Many schools and districts are reconsidering long-standing programs of grouping and tracking, searching for other means of coping with diversity in their student populations. Other communities have not attempted such sweeping changes. According to the National Education Association, without support for smaller classes and intensive staff development, many educators view ability grouping as the only workable approach to instructing secondary students with different skills.

In light of these views, it is as important to consider alternative <u>uses</u> of ability grouping, as it is to discuss alternatives <u>to</u> ability grouping. The purpose of this paper is to explore differences in how ability grouping is implemented, and to learn what makes some applications of grouping more effective than others, with special attention to the quality of instruction in low-ability classes. Observations in the paper come from a study of eighth- and ninth-grade English classes in 25 midwestern schools. The goal of the larger study was to measure variation in instructional quality among different types of classes. While drawing on such quantitative data, the present paper mainly

provides a qualitative account of the uses of abilty grouping in different settings. Rather than testing hypotheses about grouping and instruction, this paper illustrates alternatives in the ways grouping and instruction may be linked.

Varied Effects of Ability Grouping?

Currently, the conventional wisdom and the research literature are at odds with one another about the effects of ability grouping. Popular belief holds that grouping raises achievement for students in high-level classes but lowers achievement for those in positions of lesser status, resulting in widening inequality between high and low achievers over time. Studies of curriculum tracking in high schools tend to confirm this pattern, and some studies of ability grouping are also consistent with this notion. At the same time, many other analyses of secondary school grouping show no effects of grouping, or even opposite effects. Virtually every conceivable pattern of results--favoring high achievers, favoring low achievers, favoring those in the middle, etc.--can be observed in one study or another. This diversity of findings, which centers around zero, has led one reviewer to conclude that the true effects of ability grouping, all else held constant, are indeed zero:

> Comprehensive between-class ability grouping plans have little or no effect on the achievement of secondary students, at least as measured by standardized tests....Assigning students to different levels of the same course has no consistent positive or negative effects on students of high, average, or low ability (Slavin 1990, p.494).

According to this view, observed differences among studies in the effects of grouping are due to chance; taken together, the studies indicate that no real effects exist.

Another interpretation seems equally plausible: the inconsistent findings may have resulted from uncontrolled differences in the way ability grouping was implemented in the various school systems under investigation. Suppose some schools used ability grouping as a way of stratifying teachers as well as students (providing successful students with access to teachers with the best reputations), but other schools distributed teachers across tracks more equitably? What if some ability-grouping experiments held constant the provision of instruction to high, average, and low

classes, but in other experiments, high classes moved along as fast as teachers thought they could, while low classes were held back? Perhaps some schools used ability grouping to remediate low-achieving students, while others directed most of their resources toward their strongest students. Unfortunately, the studies provided little information on what was actually going on in the classes once students were assigned. As Slavin (1990, p.493) acknowledged, "in none of the studies reviewed here were there systematic observations of teaching and learning."

This interpretation does not dispute the conclusion that, all else held constant, the effects of ability grouping are nil. It suggests, however, that frequently, especially in non-experimental situations, little else is held constant. A host of observers, for example, has claimed that instructional conditions are typically better in high-group classes and inferior in classes of lower rank. Hence, both the research literature and the popular wisdom may be correct: when all is held constant, ability grouping has no effects, but when the quality of instruction varies along with the levels of the grouping system, ability grouping serves some students well but does ill to others.

Ability Grouping and Classroom Instruction

Previous research provides details on how classroom instruction varies among ability groups. The most comprehensive examination was carried out by Oakes (1985), who, following a national study of junior and senior high schools, described differences in curriculum content, instructional activities, and classroom climate. In English, for example, students in high-track classes read "standard works of literature," while low-track students typically read "young-adult fiction" (p. 76). High-track classes required expository writing and critical thinking, but low-track classes emphasized memory and comprehension. High-track classes also devoted a greater proportion of time to instructional activities, and required more time spent on homework outside of class. Students in low-track classes were more likely to be off-task, and more time in low- than in high-track classes was spent managing students' behavior.

Low-ability classes as caricatures. Some researchers have concentrated their efforts on describing the difficulties of low-ability classes. Page (1987) was initially struck by the surface similarity of low- and regular-track history classes in a well-off high school in a professional community. Upon closer inspection, however, she came to characterize the low-track classes as "caricatures" of the regular ones. Despite what appeared to be an academic curriculum, thematically similar to that of the regular track, instruction in low-track classes de-emphasized academic concerns. Teacners and students believed low-track students could not learn, and teachers were not held accountable for the learning of low-track students. In one class, the teacher communicated these low expectations by offering entertainment rather than a serious academic topic and a sense of purpose. Page commented (1987, p.453): "Academic progress is the least important aspect of Mr. Ellison's class. His worksheets offer 'games,' rather than lessons, to motivate students who [purportedly] cannot learn." Instruction in this class was highly fragmented, as classroom events were punctuated by frequent, sometimes prolonged interrruptions, and knowledge was defined by daily worksheets. In another low-track history class in this school, Page (1989) observed that ambiguity about the purpose of instruction led the teacher to forestall substantive debate, whereas academic disagreements were taken seriously and encouraged in regular-track classes.

Despite these findings, Page did not claim that all low-track classes are academically ineffective. Rather, she argued that low-track classes are "versions" of regular classes, exhibiting many similarities but differing in important yet often subtle ways (Page 1991). In the community she studied, the low-track version of regular classes was a caricature, but Page left open the possibility of other "versions" in other settings.

Ability grouping and instruction in a sample of midwestern secondary schools. Given the scope of prior observational research on grouping, there is little need to go into depth on the instructional character of classes in our study of midwestern secondary schools, except to note quickly

that our data generally conform to patterns described by Oakes, Page, and other researchers (for reviews, see Gamoran and Berends 1987, and Murphy and Hallinger 1989).

For the study, we selected nine high schools that varied in the context of their communities, including rural, urban, and suburban schools, and public and Catholic schools. To follow students from eighth to ninth grade, we began with sixteen junior high/middle schools that served as feeders for the high schools. Of the 108 English classes we studied over the two-year period, 40 in eighth grade and 50 in ninth grade were ability-grouped, i.e. students were assigned to them on the basis of prior performance (see further Gamoran in press). The remaining classes are omitted from analyses for this paper, since the present purpose is to compare alternative uses of ability grouping rather than alternatives to grouping.

Students in each class completed tests and questionnaires in the fall and spring. Teachers also completed questionnaires, as well as a weekly log of texts covered, and an interview at the end of the year. Observers visited each class four times, focusing on classroom activities (time spent on discussion, seatwork, etc.) and on classroom discourse, coding the questions asked on a variety of discourse categories (for details, see Nystrand and Gamoran 1991).

Table 1 provides examples showing that, on average, the instructional conditions we observed were similar to what others have reported. Not only did high-track classes read more long works of fiction and low-track classes fewer, but, just as Oakes described, readings in high-track classes consisted of "standard works of literature," whereas low-track readings could often be considered "young-adult fiction."[1] Similar to Page's findings, low-track classes in our study filled in blanks more often than they wrote sustained essays, and the opposite was true in high-track classes. Low-track students reported spending less time on homework and completing fewer of their written assignments than students in other classes. We also observed more off-task behavior in low-track classes. High-track classes devoted more time to recitation and discussion and less time to seatwork

than other classes, but low-track and regular classes did not differ from one another in time spent in these activities. Moreover, we observed higher proportions of open-ended questions in regular classes, and other aspects of teacher questions varied inconsistently across tracks (see further Gamoran et al. 1992).[2] Despite these interesting discrepancies, on the whole our findings conformed to the general picture of less serious, less demanding, and less stimulating instruction in low-track classes.

Alternatives

Is this pattern an inevitable result of ability grouping? Under what circumstances, if any, does it vary? In Slavin's (1990) review, two of the studies carried out since 1960 reported positive effects of grouping on achievement for low-group students.[3] Do such findings result from measurement error, or are there systematic conditions that may bring them about? Have any versions other than caricatures been observed for low-track classes?

Studies of Catholic high schools. Evidence for alternative uses of ability grouping comes from observational studies of Catholic high schools. In a study of three urban schools, Valli (1986, p.29) found that "a challenging learning environment was prevalent at all track levels." Unlike other observational studies, Valli found both students and teachers speaking favorably about lower-track classes. Students believed remedial classes were beneficial for their long-term progress. In contrast to the frustration reported in other studies, teachers of low-track classes believed they could be successful. "Nowhere did we hear teachers say, 'I don't know how to reach this type of student'" (Valli 1986, p.26).

Based on a follow-up study at one of the schools, Valli (1990) described instruction in the lower track as a "parallel curriculum," in an explicit contrast with Page's (1987) characterization of low-track classes as caricatures. Observers found "teachers determined to make lower-track classes as educationally rigorous as upper-track classes" (Valli 1990, p. 58). Classes were smaller, and teachers

reported working harder, to provide more individualized attention to students in lower-track classes. School policy directed stronger and more experienced teachers to low-track classes. Overall, the school climate stressed effort and caring. According to Valli, this climate supported instruction in lower-track classes by expressing high expectations and by requiring close monitoring of students' progress.

Comparing the tracking systems in three public and four Catholic high schools, Camarena (1990) also reported more effective uses of grouping in Catholic schools. Echoing staff in Valli's schools, teachers expressed high expectations for low-track students. As one English department chair put it, "I believe remedial kids can learn anything. It just takes longer. I think they should use the same book....The method of teaching should be different" (Camarena 1990, p.176). Unlike the public schools in her study, Camarena found that the Catholic schools had academic standards which all students were expected to master, regardless of track level. Tracking in the Catholic schools also emphasized flexibility in assignment. Guidance counselors played a prominent role in implementing this policy, monitoring students and advising them on the steps they needed to take in order to progress. The comparability of instructional content across tracks also made shifting tracks feasible.

Survey research on public and Catholic schools is consistent with the claim that Catholic high schools use tracking more effectively. Students in Catholic schools take more academic courses, regardles of track, and the academic demands in non-college-track courses are greater in Catholic than in public schools (Hoffer, Greeley, and Coleman 1985; Lee and Bryk 1988). Catholic schools produce smaller achievement gaps between tracks (at least in math), and they do so in a context of higher overall achievement (Gamoran 1991).

These studies of Catholic schools suggest that there is variability in the implementation of grouping and tracking, and that such differences are tied to student outcomes. With this conclusion in mind, we searched our data for examples of effective uses of ability grouping for students in low-

ranked classes. My purpose here is not to test for variation in the effects of ability grouping. Rather, supposing that such variation occurs, my aim is to illustrate what goes on inside the classrooms of schools that make effective use of ability grouping.

Successful low-ability classes in the sample of midwestern secondary schools. We examined the 18 schools that used ability grouping for English, seeking examples of schools that had (a) high-quality instruction in low-track classes, considering both curriculum content and student-teacher interaction, and (b) higher-than-expected achievement of students in low-track classes.[4] One school met the criteria for eighth grade and one did for ninth. Although we did not intentionally focus on the 5 Catholic schools that used ability grouping, in light of previous research it is not surprising that our two exemplary cases are both Catholic schools.

St. Elias is a small K-8 parish school.[5] Although the school is located in a suburb, its middle-class student body comes from a neighboring city as well as from the suburb itself. There were two eighth-grade classes in St. Elias, and for English, students were divided according to their performance on standardized tests. Overall, students in St. Elias scored more than 4 points above their expected achievement on our spring test of literature mastery (scores ranged from 2 to 32). Students in the low-ability class alone averaged 3.5 points above their predicted scores. Their teacher, Mrs. Grant, had spent seven of her eight years in the profession at St. Elias.

Immaculate High School is located in an urban area, in a different city from the one next to St. Elias. Like St. Elias, Immaculate is coeducational, but it is affiliated with a religious order rather than a parish. Students at Immaculate tend to be well-off economically, though there are exceptions. At both schools, over 95% of the students are white. There were 6 ninth-grade English classes at Immaculate the year we visited. One was an honors class, which included students who scored above the 83rd percentile on a standardized reading test. Another was a remedial class, which included students who scored below the 40th percentile. The remaining four classes were called "regular."

Mrs. Turner, a second-year teacher, taught the honors class, the second semester of the remedial class, and several regular sections as well. First semester, the remedial class was taught by Mrs. Beatty, who is considered the school's reading specialist. On our test of literature mastery, students at Immaculate averaged about 3 points above what would be expected on the basis of their background and fall achievement, and, relative to their starting points, students in the remedial class scored just as high as students in other classes.

We observed a number of instructional similarities in the way ability grouping was used in the two schools. First, the same teacher taught high and low classes in both schools. Remedial classes were not used as "dumping grounds" for teachers or for students, and there was no system of assigning less experienced or less successful teachers to the lower-level classes. Second, the teachers implemented similar curricula across tracks in both schools. At St. Elias, Mrs. Grant used the same set of readings with both classes. At Immaculate, the honors class read one more novel, and the remedial class one fewer, than regular classes. However, readings at all levels would be considered standard works of literature rather than juvenile fiction; the same held at St. Elias. Third, observations in both schools revealed a preference for spending class time on oral rather than written work, in all sections. In St. Elias, both classes averaged close to 17 minutes per day in recitation and discussion. In Immaculate, the low-track class averaged over 23 minutes in recitation and discussion, while the honors and regular classes averaged 19 and 17 minutes, respectively, in oral activities.

Observations and interviews indicated that Mrs. Grant, of St. Elias, and Mrs. Turner, of Immaculate, shared characteristics that Valli (1990) and Camarena (1990) linked to successful uses of ability grouping. Both teachers expressed high expectations for students in all sections, including the lower-level classes, and both showed that success with low-track classes requires special effort on the teacher's part. These views differ sharply from the opinions of teachers in Page's (1987) study.

They also contrast with Rosenbaum's (1976) finding that teachers typically prepare less and put forth less effort for low-track classes.

According to Mrs. Grant,

> I know I have to put out more for (the low-track class), and that's often very difficult for me to do....I really feel tired when I'm through...I also have to give them more encouragement as to, 'The only thing that's a stupid answer is the answer that's left unsaid.' You know, [to] get them to open up and say something.

In the low-track class, she finds it necessary to present a more structured lesson, and to monitor the students more carefully to keep them on track. During group work, "I have to float constantly among that lower group, where[as] I can let the other group go a little bit...and know that they're still on the right track." Mrs. Grant uses the blackboard more with the lower-track class, writing down what she and the students have said and rephrasing their ideas at times. Compared with the higher class, she spends less time in small groups, and during whole-class instruction, she presents more examples and tries to draw on students' personal experiences more often. In addition, she takes time outside of class as well as during class to meet individually with students. "I have to schedule the lower group at least once a week...individually to talk to...each student."[6] Grading standards were the same in the two classes.

Mrs. Turner's exertion with the low-track class was evident in one lesson, a relentless attempt, despite some resistence from students, to provide them with a background for reading To Kill a Mockingbird. After explaining conditions of racism in the South during the 1930s, she asked:

**Mrs. Turner** Now, let me just ask you, 'cause this word's gonna come up a lot in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, how do you guys feel when you hear the word "nigger"?

**Student** It's stupid.

**Mrs. Turner** Um-hm, it's stupid. [*Pause*] No other response?

**Student** It's like a childish thing, to say that.

**Mrs. Turner** It's childish, all right.

Her tone was not condescending, but collegial; she frequently used phrases such as "you guys," and "folks" in an attempt to reach out to students. Asking students how they felt reflected her attempt to personalize the story for them, and suggested that she had something to learn from them. Not all students took the question seriously, however:

**Student** I think of a booger. [*Laughter*]

**Mrs. Turner** Well, all right, that's

**Student** I mean, I don't think of a black person ... I just think of 'nigger,' 'booger,' [it] rhymes, you know.

**Student** *[sarcastically]* Good analysis.

**Mrs. Turner** Well, ok, let me just, let me just say this.

**Student** *[to Mrs. Turner]* You wouldn't say that [nigger] if there was a black person in here.

**Mrs. Turner** Would I say that?

**Student** They call themselves

**Mrs. Turner** I'm quoting! Look, Bill and Corey, I'm asking you how do you feel when you hear the word? How do you think he [a black person] feels when he hears when he hears the word?

**Student** Doesn't — they call themselves that sometimes.

Mrs. Turner encourages the students to express themselves, but she does not let matters lie. Instead, she confronts the students:

**Mrs. Turner** Oh, boy, ok, here we go, here we go. This is the thing. I had to teach myself to be able to say that word in front of a class.... And because that word is part of society in ... Macomb in 1933, nobody really saw much wrong with using the word 'nigger' to apply to a black person [then]. It's in the book, guys, and you're going to have to deal with it .... So Corey, you're saying that I wouldn't say that word if a black person were in here, and that's not true. Because I'm saying it 'cause it's in the book. But I want to know, I mean is that, is it a wrong word to you? Would you call somebody that?

**Students** No.

**Mrs. Turner** No, you shouldn't. Of course not.

Although Mrs. Turner drives home her point emphatically, she is still communicating with the students, showing deep concern for their views. Even when they do not take her seriously, she is serious about them:

*[Following further statements by students that border on racist generalizations]*

**Mrs. Turner** Be quiet! Don't turn this in to a joke....All right, I, I just can't believe some of the things I just heard, I really can't, I don't, I don't think it's funny. We've got a problem. Um, if you're going to take this book seriously, then you've got to, you've *got* to think about some of the things that you're saying. All right. It's time to relearn some things for some of you because I, I don't, I hope you don't grow up like this. All right, I hope some of you are joking, I really do. I'm getting frightened, that, that you, some of you may have these attitudes. Um, go ahead Helen.

**Student** Well we're talking about how white people, um are racist to black people, but blacks do that to us too.

**Mrs. Turner** Um hum. sure.

**Student** I mean just last night, we were on the bus, and, we weren't even doing anything, all I was like looking out the window, and, and these, these five black guys sitting right next to me...and then they start saying like they were going to start a fight. And we didn't even do anything....

**Mrs. Turner** Helen, I go along with you...the thing is though, think about, growing up, any of you...different from other people....And, if you got people all of your life telling you that you're, you're nasty, and you're a drug dealer, and you can never amount to anything. You can't go to college, you can't do this and you can't do that. How do think you're going to start to act? *[students murmur]* You're going to act just like how people tell you to act, okay, that's called the self-fulfilling prophesy. And so, you're right Helen, I know things like that happen, but some people just sort of live up to what they're, they're asked to be. All right. And that comes from us, that doesn't come, that doesn't come from anybody's skin color. That comes from hatred. That's what hatred causes, and it's, it's a disease in our society.

Here again, Mrs. Turner gives the students' opinion a hearing, and then expresses her own view. This is not to say the teacher-student relationship is symmetrical; on the contrary, the teacher draws on her authority and has the last word. But that is a far cry from the low-track teachers observed by Page (1987, 1989), who attempted to forestall debate and tended to ignore students when they expressed opposing views.

From this point, Mrs. Turner elicited a discussion of peer pressure in closed communities, such as Immaculate High School, which she finally brought back to the text:

**Mrs. Turner** In this book,...Scout Finch and Gem Finch and their friend Bill are going to be three kids, who don't understand all the hatred and racism in their community. All right, and they're going to try, in their own small way, they're going to try and fight it and they're going to get in trouble for it. And people are going to beat them up, and people are going to cast them out, and people are going to threaten their lives. But they're still going to stick to their guns, about what they believe.

To an observer, it was clear that this lesson required a great deal of energy on the teacher's part. Mrs. Turner was shaken at one point, as she told the students: "I'm getting frightened... that some of you hold these attitudes." At another point, she expressed to the students both her frustration and her determination: "I know it's not easy, you guys, I know it's not easy, but we're not going to read a Weekly Reader in this class. All right. You deserve to have this information. So stick with it." Like Mrs. Grant, Mrs. Turner found that teaching the low-track class was demanding work.

It is important to recognize that teaching the low-track class effectively did not mean, for either teacher, teaching it in the same way as other classes. Mrs. Turner's classes again provides an instructive example. On the same day as the lesson described above, Mrs. Turner also engaged in a discussion of racism with the honors class, relating it to the book they were reading, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. Compared to the lesson in the honors class, the remedial class was much more structured. Whereas the honors class began with a joke, to warm up the students for a discussion, the remedial class began with a call to attention. Mrs. Turner soon reminded students to take notes, and occasionally gave detailed instructions for where students should be in their note-taking outlines (e.g., "Part II, letter A"). In the remedial class Mrs. Turner wrestled with students for their attention ("Alan, ya ready?" "Stop it!" "Pay attention"), but this did not occur at all in the honors class. In contrast with the difficulty Mrs. Turner faced in holding a discussion on racism in the remedial class, discussion in the honors class seemed almost effortless:

**Mrs. Turner** [Can you] recall things from Huck Finn that, um, seemed racist to you?

**Student** ...Miss Watson's, that guy she's always calling 'Miss Watson's nigger.'

**Mrs. Turner** Ok, Jim? Right. Good.
*[Mrs. Turner called on other students, and interspersed their responses with her comments.]*

As in the remedial class, Mrs. Turner treated students' views seriously, but gave her own perspective:

**Student** Isn't [Twain] being historically accurate when he says 'those niggers'?

**Mrs. Turner** Oh, yes, absolutely.

**Student** So why is it racist?

**Mrs. Turner** Well this, that's kind of what I was trying to bring out on the first day, is that Twain is really just trying to mirror the society, and especially the society of...Missouri ...at the time...but Twain is using the word rather sarcastically. I mean, you're right, he's being historically accurate, but he's also trying to make a point, um, about the different people who are saying things like [that].

In contrast to the remedial class, where Mrs. Turner had to drive home her points most emphatically, in the honors class the major point was first made by a *student*. Mrs. Turner asked, "How does that [racism in the book] make you guys feel?" and a discussion ensued:

**Student** Everyone claims it's so historical, you can find that anywhere...'nigger,' you know, you just hear that...and people always think...it's so historical

**Mrs. Turner** Like, oh, we wouldn't do that anymore.

**Student** Yeah, like oh, we're not primitive, you know, and it's not, I mean everybody does that, all the time. Well, not everybody, but people, people do that...People can't get in(to) apartment buildings because they're black.

**Mrs. Turner** Um-hm.

**Student** They can't go to certain stores because they're black, or they're arrested because they're black...you know, it's just, I mean, everybody is always saying how historical it is, and it's right here, and it's right now.

This view, which developed out of a conversation between Mrs. Turner and a student, served as a foundation for Mrs. Turner's concluding comment on the issue:

Mrs. Turner: I like that comment, because do you remember... when I gave you that whole list of things that Twain is making fun of in the story? Well all of those things still exist, all

right? Gullibility, religious convention, um, all kinds of things. Did this book stop being an accurate mirror of society? At any point?

*[Students shake their heads.]*

Mrs. Turner: I don't think so. Um, our society is more technologically advanced...but this is still true, I mean these are still problems in our society, they're the dirt in our society. And we can kind of look into this book as if we were looking into a mirror and saying, oh, ok, these are the things that are wrong with *me*.

In the low-track class, we observed more structure, more emphasis on order, and more effort on the teacher's part. At the same time, both lessons exhibited a serious academic purpose and high expectations. In neither class was there a "treaty" or "bargain" allowing students to slide by if they behaved themselves (see Powell, Farrar, and Cohen 1985, for a contrast). The low-track class session was not the same as the honors class, but it was not a caricature, either.

Conclusions

This paper has three main points: (1) It is very likely that there are differences among schools in the implementation and effects of tracking. (2) There appear to be instances of successful low-track classes, at least in Catholic secondary schools. (3) The characteristics of these classes include high expectations, an academic curriculum, oral interaction between teachers and students, great effort on the part of teachers, and the absence of a system of assigning weak or less experienced teachers to the lower track.

Despite these conclusions, the paper is severely limited by the narrowness of the evidence for success with low-track students. The two examples came from Catholic schools whose students mainly have economically advantaged backgrounds. Thus, the paper adds to the small literature on the effective use of tracking in Catholic secondary schools, but provides little basis for knowing whether its findings may generalize to other settings.

Why does tracking appear more effective in Catholic secondary schools? Our study did not address this issue, but it is consistent with Valli's (1990) and Camarena's (1990) conclusion that a Catholic school *ethos* of caring and effort is the source of success. According to these authors, the

emphasis on caring leads to close monitoring of students, providing them with feedback and taking corrective steps (e.g., requiring summer school) if students falter. Emphasis on effort leads to academic rigor in all types of classes, and to a seriousness of purpose among students and teachers in low as well as high tracks.

To what extent should we attribute the success of Catholic schools with lower tracks to the economic advantages of their students? In St. Elias and Immaculate, even the lower-track students were mainly college-bound. Unlike the schools I described, though, Valli's (1990) school had a diverse student body, and many were not college-bound, yet she still found "a curriculum of effort" in the lower track. Moreover, lower-track students at Immaculate were recalcitrant just like low-track students elsewhere, as evidenced by observed off-task behavior and reported non-completion of assignments. As we saw, Mrs. Turner's effectiveness came in the face of such resistance.

It is interesting to note that in the year-end interview, both Mrs. Grant and Mrs. Turner told us that although they see the ability-grouping question as complex and multi-sided, on balance both expressed a preference for mixing the low-track students with other students. Thus, our examples of teachers who succeeded with ability grouping would actually prefer to end that arrangement. Perhaps, then, these are simply examples of good teachers, who would be effective regardless of how students were assigned. In any case, given the likelihood that ability grouping will continue to be used, we need to know much more about how to use it well.

# NOTES

[1] The former include novels such as Great Expectations and drama such as Romeo and Juliet, and the latter refer to works such as S. E. Hinton's The Outsiders and The Pigman.

[2] Open-ended questions, or "authentic" questions, were defined as questions for which the teacher had no prespecified answer. These typically included opinion questions and questions about facts that the teacher did not know. Further analyses indicated that although high- and low-track teachers asked similar proportions of authentic questions, the questions concerned different topics, with those in high-track classes far more often related to literature students were reading (Gamoran and Nystrand, in press).

[3] The two studies, both unpublished doctoral dissertations, were conducted by Chiotti (1961) and Platz (1965). Secondary-school studies prior to 1960, mainly from the 1920s and 1930s, more often showed positive effects for low achievers (Billett 1928; Martin 1927; Purdom 1929).

[4] By "higher than expected achievement," I mean achievement that was higher than would be expected on the basis of prior achievement and background conditions. This was indicated by the average class residuals from a regression of spring literature achievement on fall reading and writing skills, sex, race/ethnicity (black, Hispanic, or other), and socioeconomic status.

[5] All names are pseudonyms.

[6] Our observations confirmed that Mrs. Grant used less small-group time with the lower-track class. However, questionnaire data failed to show a significant difference in students' perceptions of how often readings were related to their own experiences.

## REFERENCES

Billett, R. O. "A Controlled Experiment to Determine the Advantages of Homogeneous Grouping." Educational Research Bulletin, 7 (1928): 139.

Camarena, Margaret. "Following the Right Track: A Comparison of Tracking Practices in Public And Catholic Schools." Pp. 159-182 in Curriculum Differentiation: Interpretive Studies in U. S. Secondary Schools, editied by Reba N. Page and Linda Valli. Albany: SUNY Press, 1990.

Chiotti, J. F. "A Progress Comparison of Ninth Grade Students in Mathematics from Three School Districts in the State of Washington with Varied Methods of Grouping." Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Northern Colorado, 1961.

Gamoran, Adam. "Access to Excellence: Assignment to Honors English Classes in the Transition from Middle to High School." Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis (in press).

Gamoran, Adam. The Variable Effects of High School Tracking. Madison, WI: National Center on Effective Secondary Schools, 1991.

Gamoran, Adam, and Mark Berends. "The Effects of Stratification in Secondary Schools: Synthesis of Survey and Ethnographic Research." Review of Educational Research 57 (1987): 415-435.

Gamoran, Adam, Martin Nystrand, Mark Berends, and Paul C. LePore. "Beyond Technical Rationality: Ability Grouping and the Distribution and Effects of Classroom Instruction." Paper presented at the International Seminar on Equity in Education, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, July 1992.

Gamoran, Adam, and Martin Nystrand. "Taking Students Seriously." In Student Engagement and Achievement in American Secondary Schools, edited by F. M. Newmann. New York: Teachers College Press, in press.

Hoffer, Thomas, Andrew M. Greeley, and James S. Coleman. "Achievement Growth in Public and Catholic Schools." Sociology of Education 58 (1985): 74-97.

Lee, Valerie E., and Anthony S. Bryk. "Curriculum Tracking as Mediating the Social Distribution of High School Achievement." Sociology of Education 62 (1988): 78-94.

Martin, W. H. "The Results of Homogeneous Grouping in the Junior High School." Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Yale University, 1927.

Murphy, Joseph, and Philip Hallinger. "Equity as Access to Learning: Curricular and Instructional Treatment Differences." Journal of Curriculum Studies, 19 (1989): 341-360.

National Education Association. Academic Tracking. Report of the NEA Executive Committee Subcommittee on Academic Tracking. Washington, DC: National Education Association, 1990.

Nystrand, Martin, and Adam Gamoran. "Student Engagement, Instructional Discourse, and Literature Achievement." Research in the Teaching of English 25 (1991): 261-290.

Oakes, Jeannie. Keeping Track: How Schools Structure Inequality. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985.

Page, Reba N. "Lower-Track Classes at a College-Preparatory School: A Caricature of Educational Encounters." Pp. 447-472 in Interpretive Ethnography of Schooling: At Home and Abroad, edited by G. Spindler and L. Spindler. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1987.

Page, Reba N. "The Lower-Track Curriculum at a 'Heavenly' High School: Cycles of Prejudice." Journal of Curriculum Studies 21 (1989): 197-221.

Page, Reba N. Lower Track Classrooms: A Curricular and Cultural Perspective. New York: Teachers College Press, 1991.

Platz, E. F. "The Effectiveness of Ability Grouping in General Science Classes." Dissertation Abstracts International 26 (1965): 1459A-1460A. (University Microfilms No. 65-6914)

Powell, Arthur, Elanor Farrar, and David K. Cohen. The Shopping-Mall High School. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1985.

Purdom, T. Luthor. The Value of Homogeneous Grouping. Baltimore: Warwick and York, 1929.

Rosenbaum, James E. Making Inequality: The Hidden Curriculum of High School Tracking. New York: Wiley, 1976.

Slavin, Robert E. "Achievement Effects of Ability Grouping in Secondary Schools: A Best-Evidence Synthesis." Review of Educational Research 60 (1990): 471-499.

Valli, Linda. "Tracking: Can it Benefit Low-achieving Students?" Paper presented at the annual meetings of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, 1986.

Valli, Linda. "A Curriculum of Effort: Tracking Students in a Catholic High School." Pp.45-65 in Curriculum Differentiation: Interpretive Studies in U. S. Secondary Schools, edited by R. Page and L. Valli. Albany: SUNY Press, 1990.

Table 1. Reading, writing, and classwork differences among different types of classes.

READING: Number of novels and dramas, grade 9, from teacher logs.

| | TYPE OF CLASS | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| TYPE OF READING | Honors/ advanced | Regular | Basic/ Remedial |
| Standard literature | 3.1 | 1.7 | 1.0 |
| Young-adult fiction | 0.0 | 0.8 | 1.0 |
| Total novels and dramas | 3.1 | 2.5 | 2.0 |
| N of classes | 11 | 30 | 9 |

WRITING: Frequency, percent completed, and homework time, grades 8 and 9.

| | TYPE OF CLASS | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| WRITING ACTIVITY | Honors/ advanced | Regular | Basic/ Remedial |
| Fill in blanks (times per month, teacher reported) | 1.3 | 1.9 | 2.6 |
| Write 1 page or more (times per month, teacher reported) | 2.4 | 1.9 | 1.2 |
| Percent of writing completed (student reported) | 91.8 | 84.9 | 81.2 |
| Homework time (hours per week, student reported) | 1.6 | 1.1 | 0.6 |
| N of classes | 24 | 44 | 24 |

CLASSWORK: Questions, activities, and behavior, grades 8 and 9.

| | TYPE OF CLASS | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| CLASSWORK ACTIVITY | Honors/ Advanced | Regular | Basic/ Remedial |
| Open-ended questions (% observed) | 16.6 | 23.0 | 16.9 |
| Question/answer and discussion time (minutes per day observed) | 17.9 | 14.5 | 14.7 |
| Seatwork time (minutes per day observed) | 9.8 | 14.4 | 14.8 |
| Students off-task (% observed) | 2.0 | 4.0 | 6.8 |
| N of classes | 24 | 44 | 24 |